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Your triglyceride level: an important number to know

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YOUR TRIGLYCERIDE LEVEL: AN IMPORTANT NUMBER TO KNOW

By Brenda Day
University Relations

When you go for your next annual physical examination, chances are your physician may discuss a new number with you -- your triglyceride level. Current research shows a connection between elevated triglyceride levels in the blood and risk factors for heart disease. So knowing your triglyceride level is important, says Assistant Professor Steven Gaskill of The University of Montana Department of Health and Human Performance.

Most fats in foods, as well as in our bodies, exist in the form of triglycerides. In our bodies, triglycerides are stored in muscle and fatty tissue and in the liver. Our bodies use triglycerides as a fuel source for energy.

We always have some triglycerides in the blood being transported to be used as fuel, Gaskill says. So normal levels are healthy. But, he reminds us, one pound of fat in the body is enough for the average person to walk about 35 miles. If we have excess fat -- fat not used as a fuel source -- we may release higher than normal quantities of triglycerides into the blood.

Triglyceride levels currently are determined by a fasting blood test and can be included in the lipid panel when testing for cholesterol. It is more common now to test for triglycerides,

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Gaskill says. The best bet, however, is to ask if triglyceride levels will be included in the lipid panel your physician orders. If not, then request it.

Like cholesterol, triglyceride levels are measured in milligrams per deciliter of blood, usually reported as "ml/dL" on test results. A level of 250 ml/dL or greater may indicate a higher risk for heart disease.

High triglyceride levels tend to be a risk factor for heart disease in several ways, Gaskill says.

- Current research shows that as triglyceride levels in the blood go up, HDL (the good cholesterol) tends to go down.
- Elevated triglycerides tend to be a risk factor for blood clots, and blood clots associated with high triglycerides also can be associated with damage to small arteries and capillaries in muscle and other tissue.
- High triglyceride levels often are associated with insulin resistance and obesity, both of which increase the risk of developing Type 2 diabetes. Diabetes, which alone can be a debilitating disease, also increases the risk for heart disease.

To lower your triglyceride levels, Gaskill recommends regular exercise and a healthy diet, with less than 30 percent of the calories from fat. Reduce visible fat in the diet and eat low-fat foods. In addition, replace simple sugars, which quickly increase blood sugar levels, with complex carbohydrates, Gaskill says. Our bodies produce insulin to lower blood sugar levels. As insulin levels increase, our bodies respond by packaging more triglycerides. Eat complex carbohydrates, such as fruits, vegetables, grains and beans in their natural forms. Unlike simple carbohydrates,

such as white flour and white rice, complex carbohydrates are rich in fiber, which slows absorption so you don't get a rapid rise in blood sugar. Limit simple sugars, such as desserts, candy, syrup and soda pop. Avoid alcohol, which also is converted to sugar in the body.

Exercise usually results in reduced body fat, which will reduce triglyceride levels, Gaskill says. Regular exercise also increases the body's effective use of insulin.

"Walk," he says. "What we're really looking at is low- to moderate-intensity exercise, during which you will use fats rather than carbohydrates as your primary fuel source. We tend to burn more calories at low to moderate exercise, rather than during hard exercise, because we're more comfortable and will continue longer."

If your triglyceride level is high and hasn't gone down after two to three months of regular exercise and reduction in your intake of fats, simple carbohydrates, alcohol and simple sugars, you may want to discuss current drug therapies with your physician. But don't give up that healthy diet and regular exercise routine if your physician recommends prescription medication, Gaskill says. A healthy diet and regular exercise can improve the effectiveness of drug therapies.

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